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The situation in Afghanistan

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The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution 68/11 and Security Council resolution 2274 (2016), in which I was requested to report every three months on developments in Afghanistan.

2. The report provides an update on the activities of the United Nations in Afghanistan, including significant humanitarian, development and human rights efforts, since the issuance of my report of 7 March 2016 (A/70/775-S/2016/218). It also provides a summary of key political and security developments and regional and international events relating to Afghanistan.

II. Relevant developments

3. The Government continued to face significant security, political and economic challenges. The initial momentum for a possible peace process with the Taliban through the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Process was lost, but progress was made towards a peace agreement with the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin. The National Assembly confirmed essential appointees, while the Government filled additional key posts. There was limited progress in advancing electoral reform and preparations for parliamentary and district council elections. The security situation was characterized by continued and intense armed clashes, which were at their highest number recorded since 2001 and had a corresponding negative impact on civilians, with rising casualties and displacement rates. The Government continued preparations for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in Warsaw and the conference on Afghanistan in Brussels and made some gains in its reform agenda, including anti-corruption

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measures and identifying future development priorities. Nevertheless, economic growth remained low and emigration continued at high levels.

A. Political developments

4. Efforts to reinvigorate the peace process with the Taliban struggled to maintain momentum after four meetings of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group, comprising Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States of America, which were covered in my previous report. On 5 March, the Taliban issued a statement in which it reiterated that it would not participate in peace talks unless its preconditions, including the withdrawal of foreign troops, its removal from international sanctions lists and the release of Taliban prisoners, were met. On 12 April, the Taliban launched its annual spring offensive. Following a major attack in Kabul a week later, on 19 April, in which 56 civilians were killed and 337 injured, the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, convened an extraordinary joint session of the National Assembly on 25 April. In his address, he questioned the readiness of Pakistan to bring the Taliban to the negotiation table, recommitted himself to weakening the insurgency through combat operations and called for the enforcement of the death penalty for prisoners convicted of crimes of national security. After he had authorized the execution of six detainees on 8 May, the Taliban hanged two Afghan National Police officers in Paktika Province two days later in retaliation. The Quadrilateral Coordination Group held its fifth meeting on 18 May in Islamabad, at which members reiterated their commitment to the peace process. No date for a future meeting was set.

5. While efforts towards a peace process with the Taliban stalled, progress was made towards finalizing a peace agreement between the Government and the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin. On 17 March, a delegation from the group held its first direct peace talks in Kabul with the High Peace Council. Additional envoys arrived in Kabul on 23 April, at the invitation of the President, for talks with senior government officials, later meeting the President on 30 April. The Chair of the Council, Syed Ahmad Gilani, approved the final draft peace agreement on 19 May before its submission to the President and the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin leadership for signature, which remains pending. Previously, on 1 April, the Council had sought to address concerns about its effectiveness by developing a new strategy for activities and terminating most of its provincial presence, maintaining only the Chairs of provincial peace councils and the heads of provincial joint secretariat teams.

6. Uncertainty over the prospect for direct talks between the Government and the Taliban increased with the killing on 21 May of the Taliban leader, Mullah Mansoor, in a drone strike by the United States in the Balochistan province of Pakistan and the announcement on 25 May by the Taliban of his successor, Haibatullah Akhundzada. In the same announcement, the son of the late Mullah Omar, Mullah Yaqoob, who had accepted an appointment on 4 April to the Taliban leadership council and the military commission, was selected as his deputy, alongside Sirajuddin Haqqani, who retained Akhundzada's deputy position. On 25 May, the faction led by Mullah Rasool, which had engaged in armed clashes with Taliban elements loyal to the late Mullah Mansoor, stated that it would not accept the appointment of Akhundzada.

7. The Government made progress on senior appointments. On 9 April, the lower house of the National Assembly endorsed the President's nomination of Taj Mohammad Jahid as Minister of the Interior and Mohammad Farid Hamidi as Attorney General. On 5 May, the President named Masoom Stanekzai, previously the acting Minister of Defence, as the acting Director of the National Directorate of Security with General Abdullah Khan becoming the new acting Minister of Defence. Their appointments require confirmation by the lower house. Several new provincial governors were also appointed, including in Badghis, Helmand, Wardak and Zabul provinces, leaving only 2 of 34 governors serving in an acting capacity. Notwithstanding these positive steps, some important positions have yet to be filled. These include the head of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, the head of the Civil Service Commission, the Minister of Mines and Petroleum and the Governors of Balkh and Nuristan provinces.

8. Meanwhile, political opposition groups continued to call for the implementation of the political agreement of 21 September 2014 that forms the basis of the National Unity Government. Some of the groups demanded the holding of parliamentary and district council elections in the third quarter of 2016, while others insisted that the term of the National Unity Government expired after two years and must be replaced, through either early presidential elections or a loya jirga. While visiting Kabul on 9 April, the Secretary of State of the United States, John Kerry, a witness to the agreement of September 2014, expressed the view that the agreement would be valid for five years. That position was criticized strongly by several figures and major factions of the political opposition, including the former President, Hamid Karzai, the head of the Afghanistan Protection and Stability Council, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, and the head of the New National Front, Anwar ul-Haq Ahady. Overall, the political opposition remained divided, reflecting a general fragmentation of the political elite. In a further indication of political divisions, the Cabinet's decision of 30 April to reroute the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan electricity corridor through the Salang Pass rather than through Bamyan Province sparked large-scale, country-wide protests by members of the Hazara ethnic minority. The dissent reached its apex when several thousand protestors gathered in the city of Kabul on 16 May. Smaller-scale counterprotests were held throughout the country in support of the decision.

9. The President reiterated the Government's commitment to holding parliamentary and district council elections and, in a letter dated 9 April, requested United Nations electoral assistance for the vote, which had been announced in January for 15 October 2016. From 10 to 19 May, the United Nations conducted an initial needs assessment mission in the city of Kabul. On 28 February, the President issued two new decrees on the election law and the law on structures, duties and authorities of the Independent Election Commission and the Independent Electoral Complaints Commission. Those decrees followed the rejection of earlier decrees by the lower house of the National Assembly. Whereas the recommendations of the Special Electoral Reform Commission were reflected in the new decree, such as the definition of electoral offences, campaign financing and voter registration, the second decree departed from some proposals, including the composition of the selection committee and the electoral bodies. The committee, which is tasked with nominating election commissioners, met on 5 April, but has yet to resume its work, given that the decree is pending in the National Assembly. As a result, the leadership of the electoral management bodies remains unclear, especially after

the resignation on 26 March of the Chair of the Independent Election Commission, Mohammad Yousuf Nuristani. The post remains vacant, on top of an overall vacancy rate of 40 per cent in the Commission.

10. The difficult security situation prompted some leading politicians associated with militia groups both inside and outside of the Government to call for a more direct role in military efforts. The First Vice-President, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and militia groups associated with his Junbish-i-Milli political party launched counter-insurgency operations in Jawzjan Province on 20 April. The acting Governor of Balkh Province, Atta Muhammad Nur, also led operations in the north. Previously, on 8 March, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf had publicly stated that former mujahideen could join the fight against the insurgency without the approval of the Government. The National Security Council has criticized these tendencies and, on 5 April, issued a directive requiring that security officials take the lead in security operations.

11. On 20 March, the removal of a poster of the First Vice-President in Mazar-e-Sharif sparked days of demonstrations and counterdemonstrations in several northern provinces before escalating to an exchange of fire between members of Junbish-i Milli and Jamiat-e-Islami on 24 March in Maymana, Faryab Province, that left one civilian dead and four injured. Calm was restored after an intervention by party leaders, provincial officials and a presidential delegation. Fighting resumed between groups associated with the two parties in the Almar district of Faryab Province on 17 and 18 May, leaving 15 people dead, including 1 civilian, and 18 injuried, including 1 civilian.

B. Security

12. The security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated, with Taliban operations at an unprecedented high rate since the beginning of 2016. Armed clashes increased by 14 per cent in the first four months of the year compared with the same period in 2015 and were higher for each month compared with previous years. In April 2016, the highest number of armed clashes was reported since June 2014, a period that coincided with the presidential elections.

13. Notwithstanding the increase in armed clashes, overall security incidents decreased. Between 16 February and 19 May, the United Nations recorded 6,122 security incidents, representing a decrease of 3 per cent compared with the same period in 2015, attributed primarily to a reduction in incidents involving improvised explosive devices. The southern, south-eastern and eastern regions continued to account for the majority of incidents (68.5 per cent). Consistent with previous trends, armed clashes accounted for the majority of security incidents (64 per cent), followed by improvised explosive devices (17.4 per cent). Targeted killings decreased: from 16 February to 19 May, 163 assassinations, including failed attempts, were recorded, representing a decrease of 37 per cent compared with the same period in 2015. A total of 15 suicide attacks were reported, compared with 29 in the same period in 2015, as well as several high-profile incidents. The latter included a complex attack against the consulate of India in Jalalabad on 2 March, an attack against the residence of the acting Director of the National Directorate of Security in the city of Kabul on 21 March and the targeted killing of two high-ranking army commanders on 24 and 27 March in Kandahar and Logar provinces, respectively. The Taliban claimed responsibility for those two attacks.

14. Insurgent attacks increased notably after the beginning of the Taliban spring offensive, Operation Omari. In its declaration of 12 April launching the annual campaign, the Taliban pledged large-scale attacks against "enemy positions" alongside tactical attacks and targeted killings of military commanders. Unlike in previous years, the movement did not threaten civilian government officials specifically. In the first two weeks of the offensive, the number of Taliban-initiated attacks almost doubled compared with the previous two weeks, resulting in the highest number of armed clashes recorded for the month of April since 2001. Since the beginning of the offensive, the Taliban has launched 36 attacks on district administrative centres, including a concerted push on the city of Kunduz. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces repelled the vast majority of those attacks. The offensive gained further momentum with the completion of the seasonal poppy harvest in Helmand Province early in May, resulting in increased clashes in the southern region. The Taliban also concentrated efforts to seize strategically important parts of Uruzgan Province along the Kandahar-Tirin Kot highway and retook control of strategic areas of Baghlan Province, where security forces had conducted a clearance operation in January.

15. The Afghan National Defence and Security Forces remained under pressure, in particular in Baghlan, Faryab, Helmand, Kunar, Kunduz, Nangahar and Uruzgan provinces, and were reinforced by Afghan special forces and international military assets. Notwithstanding intensified efforts to strengthen army units, in particular in Helmand Province, significant shortcomings remained in the areas of command and control, leadership, logistics and overall coordination. In the first four months of 2016, reports indicated rising casualties among the security forces. The sustainability of the forces remains a challenge in the light of high attrition rates. Even though recruitment was on target, re-enlistment rates remained particularly low and needed to be increased to compensate for other losses. In April 2016, army troop levels and Afghan National Police numbers reached 87 per cent and 74 per cent respectively, of the levels projected for August 2016. Some progress was made in increasing air capacity, and the air force carried out a limited number of air missions.

16. Discussions on the presence of the Resolute Support Mission of NATO beyond 2016 and future funding arrangements for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces continued ahead of the NATO summit in July. The Secretary-General of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, visited the city of Kabul on 15 and 16 March, during which he met with the President and the Chief Executive of Afghanistan, Abdullah Abdullah, and reaffirmed the commitment of NATO to Afghanistan. On 11 May, NATO members and donor representatives discuss financial support for the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces up to 2020 in a meeting in Brussels of the board of the Afghan National Army Trust Fund. On 20 May in Brussels, ministers for foreign affairs of participating countries agreed on the extension of the Mission beyond 2016.

17. Other armed groups maintained small presences on Afghan territory, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in northern Afghanistan and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP) in the east. Since my previous report, operations by the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, supported by international military air strikes, further reduced the presence of ISIL-KP in Nangarhar Province, where the group also faced pressure from the Taliban. This

contributed to ISIL-KP establishing a small, secondary presence in neighbouring Kunar and Nuristan provinces in search of safe havens and recruitment.

18. A total of 25 recorded incidents had an impact on the United Nations, including 6 cases of intimidation, 3 incidents relating to an improvised explosive device and 6 criminal-related incidents. On 20 May, a guard contracted by the United Nations was killed in the city of Kabul and another guard and a United Nations staff member were injured in a shooting incident, the circumstances of which are under investigation.

C. Regional cooperation

19. Since my previous report, efforts by Afghanistan and Pakistan to strengthen relations were affected by the lack of progress made in the peace process with the Taliban, in addition to border tensions and mutual allegations of indirect crossborder fire. The decision of Pakistan to normalize border-crossing procedures, which resulted in tighter and lengthier checks by border officials, triggered demonstrations on 2 and 5 May in Jalalabad and the Mohmand Dara district of Nangarhar Province. Border tensions further escalated early in May, culminating in the temporary closure of the Torkham border crossing from 10 to 13 May. The border reopened on 13 May following negotiations in Islamabad between the Ambassador of Afghanistan to Pakistan and the Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan.

20. Afghanistan continued its regional engagement, with an emphasis on the economy and security. On 23 May, the President, the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, and the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, signed a trilateral transport and transit agreement in Tehran to facilitate trade among the three countries and potentially those of Central Asia, in particular with the provision of sea access through the development of the Iranian port of Chabahar. During a conference on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline project on 25 April, the deputy ministers for foreign affairs of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan highlighted its importance to regional confidence-building. The ground-breaking ceremony for the electricity transmission and trade project for Central Asia and South Asia connecting Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and Tajikistan was held in Tajikistan on 12 May, with the attendance of the President of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, the Prime Minister of Kyrgystan, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Nawaz Sharif, and Chief Executive Abdullah. From 15 to 18 May, the Chief Executive visited China, where the two countries signed six bilateral cooperation documents addressing technical, infrastructure and humanitarian assistance and economic cooperation. On 21 and 22 May, the President conducted an official visit to Qatar, where he met the Emir, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, and the Prime Minister, Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al-Thani.

21. The region demonstrated continued commitment to the Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process as a platform for regional cooperation, including on counter-terrorism and regional connectivity. On 26 April, senior officials of the countries participating in the Process met in New Delhi, where they stressed the need for collective efforts to combat terrorism and extremism. Participating countries held three regional technical group meetings: on trade, commerce and investment opportunities, in India, on 4 March; on education, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, on 10 March; and

on counter-terrorism, in the city of Kabul, on 3 April. At those meetings, participants approved the holding of a series of expert meetings in preparation for the meeting of senior officials on security issues and counter-terrorism measures outlined in the Islamabad Declaration of December 2015. From 15 to 20 May, the Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force undertook consultations in the city of Kabul with government officials on their plans to develop a framework for a regional counter-terrorism strategy within the Process.

22. Central Asian countries and the Russian Federation continued to express concern about the cross-border impact of insecurity in Afghanistan and pledged increased cooperation with Kabul. On 27 and 28 April, at the fifth Moscow conference on international security, participants agreed that terrorism was a threat that could not be fought independently. From 29 to 31 March, at a United Nations seminar in Almaty, Kazakhstan, participants supported a proposal for the inclusion of Afghanistan in regional counterradicalization approaches. The Chief Executive represented Afghanistan at the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Istanbul, Turkey, on 14 and 15 April, the final communiqué of which included a call for unity in countering extremism.

III. Human rights

23. On 17 April, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) released its report on the protection of civilians in armed conflict in Afghanistan covering the first quarter of 2016. Between 1 January and 31 March, the Mission documented 1,943 civilian casualties (600 deaths and 1,343 injured), representing an increase of 2 per cent compared with the same period in 2015. The Mission attributed 60 per cent of civilian casualties to anti-government elements, 19 per cent to pro-government forces and 16 per cent to unattributed crossfire between pro-government forces and anti-government elements. A total of 6 per cent of civilian casualties could not be attributed. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of civilian casualties, causing 38 per cent of civilian deaths and injuries, followed by improvised explosive devices, accounting for 20 per cent of civilian casualties, and complex and suicide attacks, which caused 18 per cent of civilian casualties. On 25 May, UNAMA facilitated a high-level dialogue on civilian protection with senior officials of the Government, Afghan National Defence and Security Forces, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Resolute Support Mission of NATO. The security forces reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the prevention and mitigation of civilian casualties. On 28 May, the Commission signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of National Defence, the Ministry of the Interior and the National Directorate of Security intended to strengthen accountability and transparency in the functions and practices of defence and security organs.

24. Large-scale attacks by Taliban and anti-government elements in civilian-populated areas continued. On 5 April, anti-government elements detonated a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device against an unknown target in a market area in the Sia Gird district of Parwan Province, killing 8 civilians and injuring 35 others, including 4 children. Between 15 and 30 April, UNAMA documented a preliminary figure of 90 civilian casualties (15 dead and 75 injured) caused by armed clashes near the city of Kunduz. The Taliban claimed responsibility for an attack in the city of Kabul on 19 April against the directorate of security for

dignitaries, which left 56 civilians dead and 337 injured. On 25 May, the Taliban claimed responsibility for a suicide attack targeting a vehicle transporting court employees outside of the city of Kabul, which left 12 passengers dead and 9 civilians injured, including 6 children.

25. The Taliban continued to threaten media organizations and journalists, accusing them of engaging in propaganda. On 28 February, the Government established a committee consisting of representatives of the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Information and Culture, the office of the Attorney General, the National Directorate of Security and journalist unions to investigate cases involving the killing of journalists. On 3 May, the President appointed a human rights activist as Ambassador for Freedom of Expression in Afghanistan. In addition to the 6 prisoners executed on 8 May, 600 others, including 100 convicted of crimes of national security, have been sentenced to death. UNAMA continued to advocate a moratorium on the death penalty, respect for fair trial guarantees and the expediting of legal reforms to commute death sentences to life imprisonment.

26. There are continuing concerns about the detention of children on national security-related charges, including for alleged association with armed groups. As at 31 March, 227 boys were detained in juvenile rehabilitation centres on such charges. In addition, in February 2016, 166 detainees who had been arrested as minors, including 53 who were still children, were being held with adults in a high-security facility in Parwan Province.

27. Between 1 January and 31 March, the task force on monitoring and reporting verified 343 incidents resulting in 161 children killed, including 43 girls, and 449 others (336 boys and 113 girls) injured. Ground engagements remained the leading cause of child casualties, followed by explosive remnants of war and improvised explosive devices. There were 208 child casualties attributed to anti-government elements, including 149 to the Taliban. Pro-government forces were responsible for 154 child casualties. The United Nations received 18 reports of child recruitment and use involving at least 40 boys and verified the recruitment of 9 boys, comprising 7 by the Taliban, 1 by anti-government elements and 1 by the Afghan National Police. On 6 April, the Ministry of the Interior opened a new child protection unit in the Afghan National Police recruitment centre in the city of Kabul, bringing the total number of such units to seven across the country. In the first quarter of 2016, the United Nations received reports of eight incidents of abduction and verified four incidents involving five boys. The abduction of four boys was attributed to the Taliban and the abduction and rape of one boy to the Afghan Local Police.

28. Conflict-related violence continued to have an impact on health and education facilities, affecting schooling and the provision of health services for children. The task force on monitoring and reporting verified 17 incidents affecting access to education and 29 incidents affecting health-care services. On 18 April, the United Nations released a report, entitled "Education and health care at risk", covering the period from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2015. Documented therein were 132 conflict-related incidents against schools in 2015 alone, representing an increase of 86 per cent compared with 2014. Also documented therein were 125 incidents affecting access to health care in 2015, compared with 59 in 2014 and 33 in 2013.

29. The Government continued to take steps to address violence against women and implement the national action plan on Security Council resolution 1325 (2000), the funding of which was under discussion. On 24 April, the Government submitted information in follow-up to the concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW/C/AFG/CO/1-2/Add.1).

30. The United Nations continued to facilitate policy dialogue aimed at ending violence against women and supporting protection services for women. A total of 11 women protection centres in nine provinces and 5 family guidance centres for survivors of domestic violence were supported by the United Nations, of a total of 23 such centres operating throughout the country. To streamline the provision of services and ensure adherence to policies and protocols in women protection centres, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and the United Nations organized a workshop on the topic from 24 to 26 April, with the participation of 67 Ministry staff, women protection centre managers and implementing partners. The United Nations trained a total of 322 people in Farah and Khost provinces, including 134 women, comprising students, civil society representatives, provincial officials and local leaders, on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Security Council resolution 1325 (2000). A total of 133 provincial council members, including 27 women from nine northern and north-eastern provinces, received training on human rights and on gender mainstreaming in monitoring and evaluation.

31. The Government continued its work on revising the Penal Code, with the aim of submitting the entire revised law to the National Assembly by December 2016, one of its short-term commitments under the Self-reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework. On 1 May, the criminal law reform working group, chaired by the Ministry of Justice and consisting of representatives of justice sector institutions and the United Nations, submitted the first half of the revised Code to the Minister of Justice for consideration. The revisions ensure compliance with international criminal justice and human rights norms.

32. On 11 May, the lower house of the National Assembly rejected the presidential decree of 2 September 2015 on preventive detention on the grounds that it violated key provisions of the Constitution relating to due process and the right to liberty. UNAMA continued its advocacy to ensure that any proposed revised law on preventive detention reflected prevailing international standards. Previously, on 2 April, Afghanistan had submitted its second periodic report to the Committee against Torture (see CAT/C/AFG/2).

33. On 18 April, UNAMA published its report assessing prison health services in 31 of 34 provinces against the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. It was found that most prisoners had access to medical care, but that services were not available equally to vulnerable groups, including women and accompanying children. UNAMA shared its report with the Director General of the Central Prison Directorate on 26 April and provided assistance in coordinating donor support to address shortcomings.

IV. Implementation of the Kabul process and the coordination of development assistance

34. Afghanistan continued to face economic challenges. The Afghanistan Development Update, published by the World Bank on 18 April, included a downward revised growth estimate, from 1.9 to 1.5 per cent. Growth in 2016 is projected at 1.9 per cent according to the Bank, while the International Monetary Fund (IMF), in its report of 13 May, projected growth at 2.0 per cent, indicating slow rates of recovery. Both institutions stressed the importance of continuing and predictable progress on reforms, as well as security improvements, to bolster economic confidence. An indication of the limited confidence in the business environment was documented by the Afghan Investment Support Agency, which reported a decrease of 30 per cent in net investments in 2015 compared with 2014. Investments declined particularly sharply in the construction, mining and manufacturing sectors.

35. The Government, IMF and donor representatives continued discussions on the future IMF programme for Afghanistan. Following the successful completion of the staff-monitored programme on 13 April, the Government formally requested funding support for three years under the IMF Extended Credit Facility at the meetings of IMF and the World Bank Group, held in Washington, D.C., from 15 to 17 April. Negotiations on the new programme, which focused on public finance management, financial sector reform and reforms supporting private sector development, were held in New Delhi from 18 to 26 May and are expected to inform preparations for the conference on Afghanistan in Brussels in October.

36. The status of progress in reforms continued to dominate the aid policy dialogue in the lead-up to the NATO summit and the Brussels conference. On 4 April, the Minister of Finance, Eklil Hakimi, and my Special Representative, Nicholas Haysom, co-chaired a special meeting of the Joint Coordination Monitoring Board in the city of Kabul, at which the Government reported that 90 per cent of the commitments for the period 2015-2016 in the Self-reliance through Mutual Accountability Framework had been completed or were on track. The Government continued its work on the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework and shared a draft with development partners on 9 May. The Government also reported that progress had been made in drafting 3 of 22 of its national priority programmes, including the citizens' charter, the urban development and women's economic empowerment plans and the justice reform plan.

37. The linkages between security and development spending gained new attention, given that security sector spending exerted continued fiscal pressure on the Government's budget. Notwithstanding an increase of 22 per cent in 2015, government revenue is 10.4 per cent of the gross domestic product, lower than total on-budget security costs, which account for 12.2 per cent. The development of a sustainable model for economic growth and prioritized spending remains a key priority, given the subdued national demand, rising poverty and continuing low growth rates, as discussed at the spring meetings of IMF and the World Bank Group on 16 April and at the annual meeting of the Asian Development Bank on 2 May.

38. The Government reported on its efforts to advance its anti-corruption agenda. On 19 March, it created a high council on governance, justice and anti-corruption by presidential decree to oversee the drafting and implementation of a national

anti-corruption strategy. The council, once operational, will be chaired by the President and include the Chief Executive, the two Vice-Presidents, the Chief Justice, the Minister of Justice and the Attorney General. On 5 May, during a conference on combating corruption hosted by the European Union in the city of Kabul, the President announced both the establishment of a specialized anti-corruption court, to be functional by the NATO summit, and plans to strengthen the existing major crimes task force to support anti-corruption investigations. He repeated the commitments at a summit on combating -corruption, held in London on 12 May, and issued a statement in which he outlined measures, including establishing high-level anti-corruption institutions, strengthening international law enforcement cooperation, facilitating information-sharing on corrupt bidders and enforcing tax collection standards.

39. The Government also took steps to tackle corruption in the justice sector and at the subnational level. To strengthen his office, on 28 May, the new Attorney General appointed or transferred 40 key officials, including 19 of 34 new chief provincial prosecutors, and new directors for three internal units relating to countering corruption, internal audit and the elimination of violence against women. Between March 2015 and March 2016, the Judicial Surveillance Department of the Supreme Court arrested, investigated and referred for prosecution 85 individuals, including 6 judges and 14 administrative staff of the judiciary and defence counsel suspected of involvement in judicial corruption. This represents an increase of more than 100 per cent compared with the same period in 2015. The Government also reassigned 602 trial and appellate judges, representing one quarter of the judiciary, including all Chief Appeals Court judges in 33 of 34 provinces, to new positions in order to promote judicial independence by reducing the risk of local influence. On 1 May, the head of appeal prosecutions in Helmand Province publicized the names of 25 government officials suspected of corruption and land grabbing, and opened investigations.

40. The Government implemented reforms at the subnational level in an effort to improve governance and service delivery. The President appointed 12 new municipal mayors through a competitive process, bringing the total number so appointed mayors to 15 of a total of 154. To further strengthen service delivery and urban development for municipalities, on 4 February, the Government upgraded the position of Director General of Municipalities within the Independent Directorate of Local Governance to Deputy Minister.

41. Efforts also continued to professionalize the Afghan National Police and strengthen community-oriented policing. The Ministry of the Interior, with support from the United Nations, held a national conference on community policing on 1 and 2 March, with the participation of 300 individuals, including government and civil society representatives. The participants adopted a resolution calling for the expansion of the community policing concept throughout the country. On 7 April, the Ministry established a support team to strengthen training, education and leadership.

V. Humanitarian assistance

42. The humanitarian situation remained precarious, with significant new conflict-induced internal displacements, continuing access challenges and persistent

vulnerabilities for rural communities. As at 15 May, the United Nations had recorded more than 118,000 newly internally displaced persons since the beginning of 2016 in 24 of the 34 provinces, representing an increase of 10 per cent compared with the same period in 2015. At least 15,000 people have been newly displaced since the beginning of the Taliban's spring offensive. The highest numbers of new displacements were reported in Kunduz and Baghlan provinces (45,000) and in the Dehrawud district of Uruzgan Province (12,700). Access constraints continued to hinder needs assessments and the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

43. The number of refugees returning through the United Nations voluntary repatriation programme decreased significantly, reflecting uncertainties associated with the economic, political and security environment. As at 14 May, 4,643 refugees had been repatriated in 2016, including 3,901 from Pakistan and 688 from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Returnee figures are comparable to 2014, the year with the lowest recorded returnee rate since the establishment of the voluntary return programme in 2002. Many of the returnees chose not to return to their areas of origin, including many who settled in urban centres. The United Nations continues to support the Government in developing a comprehensive voluntary repatriation and reintegration strategy to address the challenges faced by the returnees. Meanwhile, 75,858 undocumented Afghans spontaneously returned: 67,619 from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 8,239 from Pakistan. An additional 62,425 Afghans were deported from the Islamic Republic of Iran and 7,259 from Pakistan. While the numbers remain high, spontaneous returns from Pakistan are 44 per cent lower than the early 2015 spike in returns following military operations in the North Waziristan Agency. Afghanistan also continues to host a high number of refugees from the North Waziristan Agency in Khost and Paktika provinces.

44. The migration of Afghans to Europe continued at high levels. Since the beginning of 2016, 39,465 Afghans have arrived in Europe by sea, accounting for 21 per cent of total arrivals and representing the second-largest population group after Syrians. In the context of the increasing numbers of Afghan migrants, several European countries increased efforts to return rejected Afghan asylum seekers. Between 1 January and 31 April, the International Organization for Migration assisted 1,851 voluntary returnees from Europe, compared with 450 in the same period in 2015. Almost half of the returnees originated from Germany. Discussions continue between the Government and partners on measures to alter migration patterns and create incentives for citizens to remain in Afghanistan.

45. Afghanistan continued to be affected by natural disasters and extreme weather conditions, which resulted in flooding and displacement. Between March and April, there were 79 recorded national disaster incidents affecting 36,945 individuals, including 1,043 who were displaced in Helmand Province as a result of flooding and who received assistance from humanitarian partners. The normal to above-normal rains in March and April in key crop-growing areas of Afghanistan are expected to result in an average wheat harvest and improved food security for the majority of poor households throughout the country in the coming three months.

46. Efforts to eradicate polio, which remains endemic in Afghanistan, continued to face access and security challenges. Five new cases have been identified since the beginning of 2016: three in Kunar Province and one each in Helmand and Kandahar provinces. The Ministry of Health, supported by the United Nations, conducted supplementary immunization activities, including two nationwide campaigns. Some

200,000 children are estimated not to have been vaccinated, comprising 147,000 children in the north-eastern region and 30,555 children in the eastern region, where anti-government elements prevented access, and 22,445 children in the southern region, where active fighting was under way. Monitoring of the campaigns in Helmand and Farah provinces remained limited because of insecurity.

47. Mine action partners, coordinated by the United Nations, cleared 42 minefields and three battlefields in the first quarter of 2016, with the result that 15 communities in five districts were declared mine-free. At the end of the quarter, it was estimated that 4,334 minefields and battlefields remained, affecting 1,584 communities across 255 districts. The transfer of mine action coordination to the Government was on schedule and expected to be completed in 2017.

48. Humanitarian access constraints continue to be recorded under the United Nations global monitoring frameworks. In total, 75 incidents against non-governmental organizations, the United Nations and other international organizations were registered in the first four months of 2016. Five aid workers were killed and eight injured. Abductions have risen significantly, with 81 aid workers abducted, compared with 59 during the same period in 2015. Most abduction incidents affected demining agencies. Access to Badakhshan Province was improved through new flights by the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service.

49. As at 16 May, overall humanitarian funding for Afghanistan had reached $169 million, of which $65 million was designated for activities envisaged in the Humanitarian Response Plan and $104 million for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The Response Plan was 16 per cent funded. Funding for food, nutrition, health care and refugee and returnee programmes remains particularly low. The Afghanistan Humanitarian Fund has received $25 million to date in 2016, with funding focused on emergency health care, assistance to displaced families and humanitarian assessments.

VI. Counter-narcotics

50. On 16 March, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released the socioeconomic analysis portion of its report entitled "Afghanistan opium survey 2015", in which it evaluated the opiate economy and the factors driving opium poppy cultivation. The report's authors found that the estimated gross value of opiates in Afghanistan had decreased by 45 per cent to $1.56 billion from 2014, but still represented 7 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, compared with 13 per cent in 2014. The significant shrinking of the opiate economy is a reflection of both substantial reductions in opium cultivation and production and a decrease in the average farm-gate price of dry opium in 2015. The low value of the 2015 harvest resulted in significant income reductions for rural households engaged in opium cultivation, given that the sale of poppy and its derivatives accounted for 40 per cent of their annual income, and further increased the socioeconomic vulnerability of rural communities. For the first time, the report included a section on the role of Afghan women in opium poppy cultivation, with its authors concluding that, while women were motivated by the additional cash income, they had only a limited influence on whether to grow poppy or opt for alternative crops.

51. No significant drug crop eradication was reported because of security challenges in key poppy-growing areas and funding constraints. Between

10 February and 23 May, Afghan law enforcement authorities conducted 694 counter-narcotics operations, resulting in the seizure of 1,329 kg of heroin, 3,058 kg of opium, 860 kg of morphine, 29 kg of methamphetamine and 7,688 kg of hashish, and the seizure of 1,406 kg of solid precursor chemicals and 1,442 litres of liquid precursor chemicals. In addition, five laboratories were dismantled, 851 suspects arrested and 143 vehicles, 84 weapons and 95 mobile phones seized. Three members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces were killed and five wounded in the course of those operations.

VII. Mission support

52. UNAMA continued the construction of its new premises in the city of Kunduz to ensure full compliance with minimum operating security standards. To enhance medical services provided to United Nations personnel in field locations, medical emergency response teams deployed in April to eight locations in Bamyan, Faizabad, Gardez, Herat, Jalalabad, Kabul and Kandahar.

VIII. Observations

53. Interrelated economic, political and security challenges continue to test the Government and people of Afghanistan. Low economic growth, high unemployment and an intensifying insurgency have led to new levels of internal displacement and migration and fuelled a vocal political opposition. While these circumstances are not of the Government's making, they require its determined response. The Government has clearly articulated a path towards greater stability, accountability and self-reliance, the realization of which remains a work in progress. While the international community considers, at meetings in Brussels and Warsaw in 2016, the assistance that it will provide to Afghanistan, I would underscore that the country's path to stability is fragile and relies on a clear and long-term commitment of international support.

54. I commend the commitment of Afghanistan, with China, Pakistan and the United States, in the context of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on the Afghan Peace and Reconciliation Process. Only through a negotiated political agreement will Afghans attain the sustainable peace that they deserve and need. Direct talks between the Government and the Taliban remain essential in this regard, and I call upon Member States to contribute to the achievement of such an outcome.

55. I take note of the draft peace agreement between the Government and the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin and, once ratified, would welcome the commitments made therein to renounce violence and links with terrorists groups and to support human rights. While hoping that the implementation of such an agreement may lead to a reduction in the levels of conflict-related violence, I underline the importance for Afghanistan of abiding by its international obligations to hold perpetrators to account for the commission of war crimes, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights.

56. The increase in the number of civilian casualties owing to conflict is unacceptable. The casualties documented in the first quarter of 2016 are the highest on record since 2009. Conflict-related violence continued to have a devastating

impact on children, who accounted for almost one third of all casualties during the first quarter. An increase in the number of displacements can be expected because of continuing conflict. The Government's commitment to reducing civilian casualties will be demonstrated in the finalization and implementation of a national civilian casualty prevention and mitigation policy.

57. The decision by the lower house of the National Assembly to reject the decree of 2 September 2015 on preventive detention, the provisions of which run counter to the Constitution and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Afghanistan is a party, is testament to the desire of the people of Afghanistan to advance the observance of the rule of law and of human rights. It is hoped that the Government will also move to apply a moratorium on the use of the death penalty and to expedite legal reforms that will allow death sentences to be commuted to life imprisonment.

58. The progress made in appointments to senior positions in the Government needs to be strengthened and the remaining key Cabinet positions filled. Likewise, appointments to and the staffing of the electoral management bodies, as well as consensus on reforms, are urgently required so that preparations for the elections can be secured if they are to be credible and be held in 2016.

59. The President's commitment to adopting more stringent policies and practices to combat corruption must translate into action. To do so will require the firm support of the National Assembly in safeguarding and upholding the public trust. The Government's implementation of the access to information law of November 2014 would be an important contribution to improving transparency and enabling scrutiny by civil society, which would aid anti-corruption efforts.

60. The summit in Warsaw and the conference in Brussels on Afghanistan can represent an essential pivot in the trajectory of the country and the region and promote crucial efforts to strengthen connectivity and cross-border cooperation. At the same time, it will require sustained attention to ensure an approach that recognizes the difficult task for the Government in shouldering the financing of security forces while also funding development initiatives. The Government must play its role and demonstrate that it is committed to implementing the reforms necessary to ensure the tangible impact of international assistance on the lives of Afghans. I would underscore that the expectations of Member States of the Afghan reform agenda must be realistic, taking into account the formidable challenges facing the country.

61. I thank all the United Nations personnel in Afghanistan and my outgoing Special Representative, Nicholas Haysom, for their continued dedication, under challenging conditions, to fulfilling our commitments in support of the people of Afghanistan and welcome my incoming Special Representative, Tadamichi Yamamoto.